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ABSTRACT

Strengths of the committee system and its value for colleges and universities are discussed. College committees provide more people with the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Leadership is provided to a committee by a chairperson who acts as a facilitator. The value of a committee depends on the scope of its mission, the caliber of its membership, the support it receives from senior administration, and its modus operandi. Functions that committees perform and their strengths are as follows: improving the information-gathering process; dividing the workload between several people and keeping pace with the flow of decision-making needs; creating a sense of ownership among its members; encouraging democratic communication; encouraging coordination among departments; providing a forum to debate issues; improving solutions as a result of the committee process; providing a check and balance system by raising biases or mistakes of a single member; facilitating the acceptance of solutions; providing anonymous solutions on controversial issues; enhancing administrators' awareness of relevant institutional issues as perceived by staff, students, alumni, and others; creating a team attitude; improving professional self-esteem among members; and developing leadership skills. (SW)

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THE COMMITTEE REVISITED

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The Committee Revisited

The committee system is surviving, despite endless criticism

by

James I. Woodrow

Most of us serve on them. Most of us complain about them. We know them as committees. We also know them as time consuming, political, poorly organized, and inappropriately used. Some of the more common wise cracks and hyperbole include:

- The camel is a horse designed by a committee.
- Committees are created by the unable to get the unwilling to do the unnecessary.
- Committees keep minutes and waste hours.

You've probably heard these and others on different occasions. No other management tool is criticized by advancement officers as much as the committee system.

In spite of all the criticism, the committee system remains on probably every campus in the country. Why? Most likely because of its unique function.

This paper is adapted from the author's doctoral research at Vanderbilt University for distribution to the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education membership. Chief advancement officers at liberal arts colleges participated in this study of strengths of the committee system. Copyright (c) 1985.

A committee can give special attention to issues at hand by combining the institution's resources to find a solution. The complex issues of today's colleges and universities have made it virtually impossible for one person to manage all the details and arrive at all the answers.

Combining an institution's resources by actively involving its people can result in numerous benefits to the health of an institution. It is important to remind ourselves of these benefits since they were the impetus in bringing the committee system to the college campus and have continued to keep it alive. Although the complaints about committees are often justified, denying people the opportunity to participate in formulating policy and in making decisions is certain to cause even more complaints.

We can no longer downplay the value of people's participation in the decision-making process. As William Ouchi argues in Theory Z, the participative group process is a highly visible and unmistakable symbol of an institution's commitment to working together. College committees provide more people with the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. People should be a part of the process of arriving at a decision when they're going to be affected by that decision, writes John Naisbitt in Megatrends. He goes on to say that it's irrelevant whether or not we agree with the notion because participative democracy has now trickled into the very heart of our value system.

The committee system has the opportunity to become the champion of the participative management concept. It's already in place and is more than a symbol. It plays an active role on the campus by creating a climate of healthy cooperation and interest among a diverse and talented body of people within an institution.

There are at least a dozen strengths of the committee system.

a. Effective committees can improve the information-gathering process. Rather than contacting each resource person individually, a committee can expedite the information-gathering process by bringing these individuals together at once. There's nothing profound about the natural ability of a group of people to collect more and better information than one person.

b. Committees can divide the workload between several people and consequently keep pace with the continuous flow of decision-making needs.

c. A committee can create a sense of ownership among its members and give them the feeling that they are contributing to the institution's development.

d. Committees can encourage more democratic communication by eliminating the hierarchical chain of command that people are otherwise required to follow in addressing an issue. The committee system allows everyone to talk to everyone else, regardless of their formal position in the chain of command.

e. Good committees can encourage coordination and the spirit of cooperation among departments by dealing with each other's problems. Better coordination between departments can bridge the fragmentation that occurs between today's administrative and academic specialists.

f. The committee can provide a forum to debate issues at hand. Raising alternative ideas or solutions, for instance, is one of the primary strengths of the scholar. We need to continue utilizing this valuable resource in our committees.

g. Furthermore, solutions can often be improved as a result of the committee process. The concept of combined opinion (i.e., two heads are better than one) supports the belief that solutions can be improved by an effective committee. Because of the opportunity for a merging of ideas from more than one person, each phase of the problem-solving process can be enhanced. Committee members can collectively identify and dissect a problem better, they can more thoroughly determine all possible solutions, and they can analyze these possible solutions with a higher degree of accuracy in order to arrive at a final solution. It may be time consuming, but the end result is often an improvement of decisions when group deliberation is encouraged.

h. Committees can provide a check and balance system by raising biases or mistakes of single committee members who otherwise might not have arrived at the best solution if they had made it on their own.

i. A committee can facilitate the acceptance of solutions. When individual committee members support decisions of the entire committee, they can collect the support of others throughout the institution who respect them as colleagues.

j. The committee can also provide anonymous solutions on controversial issues to prevent the blame from falling on only one person when the solution is announced. In politics, for instance, President Reagan very astutely appoints bipartisan committees to reach decisions covering tough issues like tax reform and its impact on higher education.

k. Healthy committees can enhance administrators' awareness of relevant institutional issues as perceived by faculty and staff, students, alumni, and other constituents. Sometimes the committee is the only communication vehicle to an administrator.

l. Effective committees can enrich the basic social needs of committee members by creating a team attitude, rather than a hierarchical attitude, toward work. Involving people on committees creates a sense of fellowship that is essential to their social needs.

m. Finally, committees are capable of improving professional self-esteem among their members and can assist members in developing their own leadership style. In effect, the committee can be a training ground for young faculty members and administrators. Committee membership provides the junior faculty member and administrator with the policy-making experience of expressing personal ideas, speaking before a group, and defending points of view. This experience can strengthen the leadership development of committee members.

These strengths of the committee system can't be enhanced without a key component -- leadership. An effective chairperson will serve as a facilitator, not an order giver, in providing leadership to a committee. The chairperson is responsible for carefully facilitating the strengths of the committee system to their fullest extent.

But the usefulness and effectiveness of a committee depend on more than the leadership of its chairperson, as critical as this responsibility is to a committee. The value of a committee also depends on the scope of its mission, the caliber of its membership, the support it receives from senior administration, and its modus operandi. When optimized, these components will provide an environment conducive to bringing out the best -- the strengths -- of the committee system.

Colleges and universities that are progressing with the times must have a good committee system. As advancement officers, we should continue to endorse

and serve on our own advancement-related committees as well as campus-wide committees. We should remember, though, that committees are best when they can perform a particular function better than a single individual. The basic rationale for maintaining the committee system is to make the institution more effective and responsive by optimizing its human resources.

In the final analysis, committees can provide an excellent means for influencing the participation of faculty and staff, students, alumni, and other constituents. The committee is nothing more than a formal work group. Although there's much misuse and abuse of committees, the concept is too valuable to abolish. There's good reason to both advocate and use them. They're an asset we can't afford to give up. Besides, the world just wouldn't be the same without the camel.